

# Femme Fatale 2010\*

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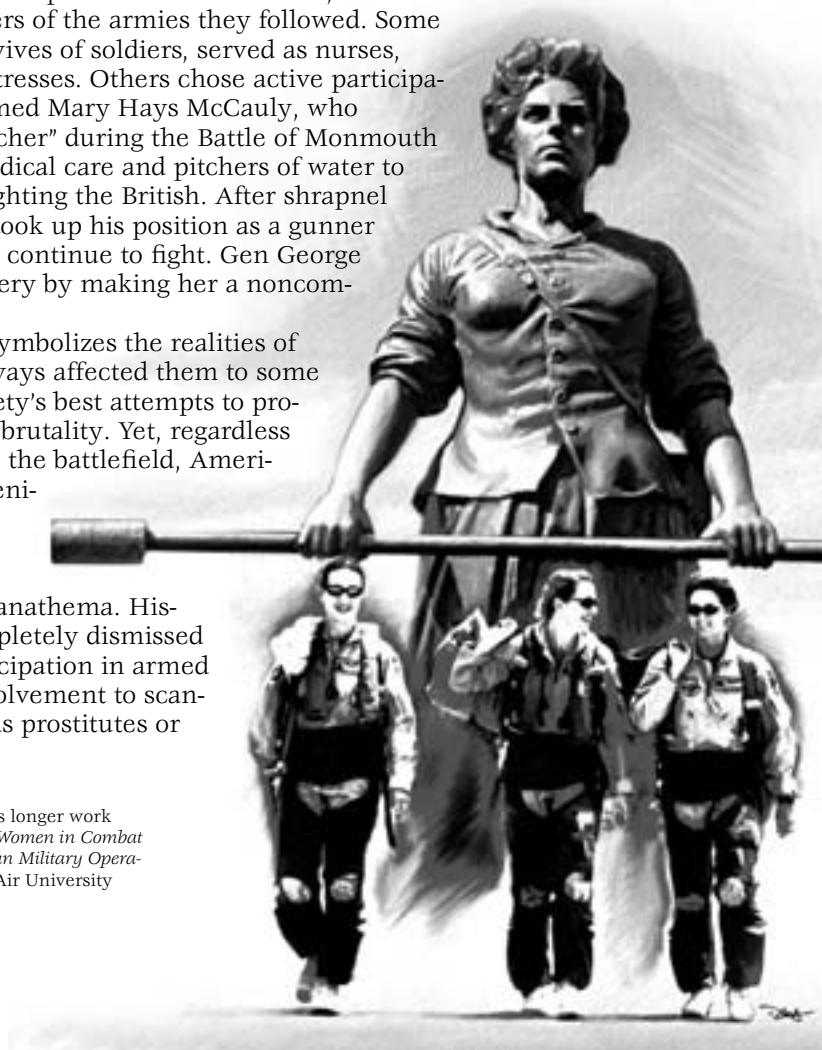
*According to Tolstoy, war and women are things that don't go together—they exist apart. But when I witnessed all the atrocities of 1941, the death of my friends and relatives, peaceful civilians, I wanted to liberate my people from the enemy. I want you to underline in red that it was the cherished dream of the girls to liberate the land, but none of us wanted to fight—to kill.*

—Capt Mariya Dolina  
125th Guards Bomber Regiment  
Hero of the Soviet Union

Women have always participated in armed conflict, most often as active supporters of the armies they followed. Some women, usually the wives of soldiers, served as nurses, laundresses, cooks, and seamstresses. Others chose active participation in battle, including the famed Mary Hays McCauly, who earned the moniker "Molly Pitcher" during the Battle of Monmouth in 1778 when she provided medical care and pitchers of water to Continental Army members fighting the British. After shrapnel struck her husband, McCauly took up his position as a gunner so that the artillery crew could continue to fight. Gen George Washington rewarded her bravery by making her a noncommissioned officer.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Molly Pitcher symbolizes the realities of women and war, which has always affected them to some capacity, despite civilized society's best attempts to protect the gentler sex from war's brutality. Yet, regardless of Molly Pitcher's successes on the battlefield, American culture has traditionally denigrated female participation in war. In most cultures, even today, the idea of a woman engaged in combat operations is anathema. History, therefore, has either completely dismissed female contributions and participation in armed conflicts or relegated their involvement to scandalous supporting roles, such as prostitutes or pillow-friendly spies.

\*This article is derived from the author's longer work *Femme Fatale: An Examination of the Role of Women in Combat and the Policy Implications for Future American Military Operations*, Drew Paper no. 5 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2009).



<b>Report Documentation Page</b>			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE <b>2010</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010</b>		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Femme Fatale 2010</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Air and Space Power Journal,155 N. Twining Street,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6026</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>15</b>
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

In an effort to explore whether current US laws and policies excluding women from combat remain valid or need amending, this article reviews three case studies that demonstrate the variety of ways women have participated in modern armed conflict. The first one examines the experiences of World War II female Soviet pilots in their more traditional involvement in armed conflict. The second analyzes the asymmetric aspects of female participation during conflict, focusing specifically on terrorist activities. The final case study presents American females' experience in the All Volunteer Force, emphasizing their performance in combat operations since such participation began in the 1990s.

The article concludes by proposing how the US military and society should move forward in the debate over the role of women in combat. Despite the best attempts by critics to argue that society should protect women from the violence of war, in reality, women in the All Volunteer Force structure currently engage in combat.

The three case studies offer evidence that women have participated and always will participate in combat. Moreover, their successful contributions have made a difference. To deny citizens the right to fight for their country based solely on gender remains blatant discrimination. The United States should once again assume a world-leadership role with regard to equality, live up to the rhetoric of its principles, and demonstrate the civic parity of women and men.

### Soviet Female Fliers of World War II

Over the centuries, Russian culture has embraced and even glorified the female warrior ethos.<sup>2</sup> Although the role of these *polianitsy* or warrior heroines diminished as more stringent patriarchal cultures emerged, legends of female fighters remained a part of Russian culture.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, whenever the motherland came under threat of invading forces, women stood to fight alongside Russian men.

The Russian Civil War presented women further opportunities for involvement in combat operations. The Workers' and Peasants' Air Fleet, for example, which desperately sought pilots to fight against the White anti-Bolsheviks, did not object to the use of women in combat roles. Marxist ideology promoted equality among the sexes. The struggle of women in a patriarchal society paralleled that of workers against capitalism; leaders of the communist revolution found willing supporters and participants among the disenfranchised half of the population. Communist leaders propagated the belief that once the revolution succeeded, "men and women naturally would become equals; there could be no gender discrimination in a socialist state."<sup>4</sup>

Under Bolshevik leadership, Russian women gained what few other females had: equality. Previously the provisional government had granted women equality under the law, equipping them with improved educational and professional opportunities.<sup>5</sup> The Bolsheviks championed the theory that Marxist socialism would resolve all societal difficulties, equating the establishment of a socialist government with the creation of a utopian society in which men accepted "women in combat as a matter of course, without sexist resistance or pious welcome speeches."<sup>6</sup>

Later, Soviet educational opportunities afforded women in the 1920s and 1930s allowed a number of them to receive flying training, mostly through aero clubs although a select few took military training. Soviet women recorded several civilian aerial achievements, including the nonstop flight of the *Rodina*.<sup>7</sup> Crewed by three females, this aircraft broke the women's international record for flight over a straight-line distance, establishing a new nonstop standard of just over 26 hours.<sup>8</sup> Further, Maj Marina Raskova, navigator on the *Rodina*, survived alone for 10 days in the subarctic forests of Russia on a couple of candy bars and wild berries following her bailout prior to the aircraft's emergency landing. She immediately became a hero in the Soviet Union, and Stalin himself propagated her heroic image.

### **Hitler Invades the Soviet Union**

Despite the popularity of the *Rodina*'s female military officers, when Hitler initiated Operation Barbarossa, the Soviet military included very few women.<sup>9</sup> Although no government regulation specifically denied females acceptance into the military, Soviet military leadership discouraged them from volunteering for active military service and often turned volunteers away. Instead, Soviet leaders encouraged women volunteers to join paramilitary groups in order to receive various types of military training, including flight training. Sponsored by the Soviet Komsomol (a communist youth organization), Soviet women maintained higher levels of fitness through military-related sports; received weapons training, including sport sharpshooting; and even flight training.<sup>10</sup>

In response to Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Raskova sought to tap this wealth of fighting potential among female Soviets, using her influence with Stalin and the Defense Ministry to persuade them to press forward with female aviation units. Women, particularly instructor pilots, inundated Raskova with requests to join her units or asked how they could "put their skills to use in the service of their country—more particularly, how they could get to the front, preferably in an airforce [sic] unit."<sup>11</sup> Stalin finally agreed to establish the 122nd Composite Air Group, comprised of three all-female units: the 586th Fighter Regiment, 587th Bomber Regiment, and 588th Air Regiment.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Result**

Despite attempts to highlight the contributions of women during the war, the Soviet public and military apparently knew very little about the female combatants. Maj Marta Meritus of the 125th regiment described a reunion for veterans following the war: "The commander of the front, under whom we fought during the war, asked why we had been asked to this reception and who we were. We had to explain that we were the pilots and the mechanics of the 125th regiment. He had thought it to be a male regi-

ment, and it was a surprise to him to learn about us after the war. Even now very few men can believe that women crews could fly the dive bomber."<sup>13</sup> Until recently, Western reactions were even further dismissive.

According to Kazimiera Cottam, Western scholars tended to regard female Soviet combatants merely as part of Soviet propaganda, noting that accounts of "female success in the military [were] often dismissed as anecdotal, propaganda-type stories."<sup>14</sup> The Soviet government and military did little to dispel such assumptions. Although Russia has a rich history of women successfully serving in combat, its modern armed forces represent a more conservative approach to women in combat, similar to the Soviet experience during and following World War II.

During the 1990s, half of the conscripts in the Russian Army were women, many of them serving in combat positions—including machine gunners.<sup>15</sup> The performance of these female combat troops bodes ill for future inclusion of Russian women in combat. According to Gen Vladimir Konstantinov of the General Staff's Organizational-Mobilization Main Directorate, "In 1999 all female contract soldiers of the Leningrad Military District 138th and 200th permanent readiness motor-rifle brigades refused to go to fight with their units in the second Chechen campaign, causing immense problems in refitting the units with men."<sup>16</sup> The Defense Ministry reports that the current percentage of female recruits is holding steady at 24 percent and that in future operations, the ministry will exclude women from combat operations.<sup>17</sup>

### **Shahidas in a Brave New World**

Most Americans associate the current overseas contingency operations with conflict between Western secular ideals and radicalized Islamic traditions. The American press and media continue to reinforce this notion. Terrorism serves as a tool for oppressed peoples and groups seeking political upheaval, but state actors also often resort to terrorism to control their populations. In the

modern era, both the oppressed and the oppressors have used terrorism without mercy and without limitation.

### ***Societal Expectations in the Modern Age of Terrorism***

Encouraged by news reports, Americans further assume that Islam seeks to relegate women to subservient roles and that most Muslim women would resist this subjugation, if able, as American women did during their suffrage and equal rights movements. These assumptions are misguided. In the traditions of the three major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) stemming from the Middle East, a woman remains subservient to the man of the household. In contrast to male children, nonbelievers, and slaves, all of whom can rise above their initial positions of inferiority through age, acceptance of faith, and emancipation, women remain “irredeemably fixed in [their] inferiority.”<sup>18</sup>

The veil has come to symbolize this struggle between the traditions of Islam and modern Western ideals. Attempts by the French government to remove the veil from Algerian women during Algeria's war for independence actually resulted (in addition to other, more gruesome tactics such as rape) in women joining the Algerian resistance movement. In ceremonies across Algeria, French military and colonial leaders *encouraged* women to unveil themselves in front of crowds of their fellow Algerians and Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Steps taken by the French military to emancipate Algerian women from cultural and societal traditions revealed two ironies. First, the French strategists demonstrated their ignorance of Algerian culture: prior to their initiatives, most Algerian women did not wear the veil.<sup>20</sup> Second, the act of unveiling represented the release of Algerian women from male oppression, but French soldiers raped them as a means of coercing obedience and acceptance of French rule by all Algerians.<sup>21</sup> After the colonial government instituted its program to lift the veils of Algerian women in 1958, they began to don veils in defiance of the French authorities.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of winning the hearts and minds of half the targeted populations in unstable areas in the world, Western attempts at liberating women from their traditional cultures have repeated the results seen in French-controlled Algeria. Women have turned away from Western ideals of freedom to seek justice for fellow Muslim or tribal members. As Bernard Lewis observes, “One of the most noticeable consequences of Islamic revival has been the return, by women though not by men, to full traditional attire.”<sup>23</sup> Further, Lewis explains, Muslims have traditionally believed that “the converse of tyranny was not freedom but justice.”<sup>24</sup>

The return to traditional dress is not the only way in which Muslim women currently demonstrate their dedication to culture, religion, and society. Increasingly, women from across the Muslim spectrum wish to join the fight against perceived Western oppression. Within the Palestinian territories, female combatant units have recently begun to form. In 2002 four young women conducted suicide-bombing missions against the Israeli military and civilians. These *shahidas* (female martyrs) became role models for Palestinian women who seek the release of their communities from Israeli control. In 2005 the first all-female unit formed under the military wing of Hamas—Izz al-Din Al-Qassam (derived from the name of a famous Palestinian religious leader who resisted the British rule of Palestine and founded the Black Hand).<sup>25</sup>

The impetus for women to join modern resistance movements and sacrifice their lives for their community parallels the motivations of female Soviet fighters in World War II. Modern female resistance fighters seek primarily to contribute to the defense of their national identity or tribes while bringing honor and security to their families. Similarly, modern female insurgents increasingly participate in combat operations as well as in more traditional supporting roles. The use of women in suicide operations by conservative Islamic groups has initiated a new phase in insurgent struggles worldwide. In the Israeli-Palestinian con-

flict, Palestinians have used women to send Israelis a deadly message: "Terrorism is not just a fringe phenomenon. Terrorists are not just strange young men whispering in dark rooms. Terrorists are high-school students, terrorists are women—and terrorists are all around you."<sup>26</sup>

### **Chechen Black Widows: Honor Is All That Remains**

Chechen rebels have certainly exploited the tactical advantage of women combatants. Most Americans, if they are aware of the conflict between Chechnya and Russia at all, assume that the Chechens are simply another terrorist group motivated by a radical form of Islam. The tragic events of the school massacre in Beslan and the occupation of the Moscow theater by Chechen rebels as reported by Western media outlets encourage this perception.<sup>27</sup> More recently, reports of attacks by two female Chechen rebels on the Moscow Red Arrow underground train further highlight the infatuation with terrorists' religious views. A report from the British paper *Daily Mail* emphasizes the religious affiliation of suspected terrorists yet makes no mention of other underlying causes for rebels turning to terrorist actions.<sup>28</sup> The article accentuates the religious affiliation of the suspected bombers, claiming that the women were likely "Muslim women radicalized by the situation in the North Caucasus" and that they were part of the "Shahidka" movement, a term deriving from the Arabic word *shahid*.<sup>29</sup>

News reporting and comments from Russian officials continue to focus on the religion of the rebels rather than the political situation that precipitated this terror movement. Naturally, this perspective can encourage the reader to assume that this group is merely another radical Muslim terrorist organization. This assumption is incorrect and fails to acknowledge the key motivating factor for Chechen rebels, including female fighters: the cultural importance of personal honor. Chechen "Black Widows" or female suicide bombers adhere to the "rules of *Adat*,

a traditional Chechen code of honor," which inspires them to "exact retribution for the sake of honor" against the Russian occupying presence in Chechnya.<sup>30</sup> For the same reasons their men challenge the occupation of their homeland by the Russians, Chechen women have demonstrated, with deadly consequences, their dedication to fighting for their people and culture.

In 2003 Chechen rebel commander Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi explained why women account for 60 percent of Chechen suicide bombers: "These women, particularly the wives of the mujahedin who are martyred, are being threatened in their homes; their honour and everything are being threatened. They do not accept being humiliated and living under occupation."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, they are not the only women in the modern era who have suffered personal tragedies and then turned to terrorism; resistance fighters in Sri Lanka have channeled their grief and anger into weapons against their government.

### **Tamil Black Tigresses: Hindu Honor with a Nationalist Twist**

The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka (LTTE), that country's minority Hindu population, sought the establishment of an independent Tamil state, free from involvement of the majority Buddhist population (Sinhala). LTTE actively recruits women, advocating their use in operations to secure political objectives. Such action brings considerable honor to the woman and her family; in turn, Tamil society reveres the "Black Tigresses" as saints since they are willing to die for their people. Acceptance of women in the Tamil insurgency even led to innovations in terrorist operations. LTTE developed the first suicide belt, for example, designing it for female use since it makes the wearer look pregnant, allowing the insurgent to pass through security checkpoints with ease.<sup>32</sup>

Thenmuli Rajaratnam—the first female Tamil Tiger suicide bomber, later honored as a saint by LTTE, and known as Dhanu—detonated a bomb, killing 16 bystanders during her assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

According to most sources (and supported by LTTE propagandists), Dhanu's motivations for her action stemmed from her gang rape at the hands of Indian soldiers sent by Gandhi to Sri Lanka to suppress the Tamil separatist movement.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Dhanu, the accepted explanation of her actions began when occupying Indian forces slaughtered her family and raped her.<sup>34</sup> In Tamil culture, such women see martyrdom for their people as their only option. According to Robert Pape, "Some of the female suicide bombers in Sri Lanka are believed to be victims of rape at the hands of Sinhalese or Indian soldiers, a stigma that destroys their prospects for marriage and rules out procreation. . . . 'Acting as a human bomb' . . . is an understood and accepted offering for a woman who will never be a mother."<sup>35</sup> Not only does suicide bombing release a woman and her family from the stigma of rape, but also it gives a woman unable to produce children a means to mother her society. In the Tamil culture, "Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis; feeding them before themselves or the girl children, serving them and so on."<sup>36</sup> For a woman who cannot contribute to society in this fashion, fighting against her people's enemies may often seem the only option.

## The American Experience

In the remote eastern Paktia province of Afghanistan, a roadside bomb exploded through a four-vehicle convoy of Humvees in April 2007, wounding five Soldiers. The medic assigned to the convoy rushed to protect the victims from insurgent gunfire "as mortars fell less than 100 yards away."<sup>37</sup> After the convoy held off the attackers, the medic told the Associated Press that she "did not really think about anything except for getting the guys to a safer location and getting them taken care of and getting them out of there."<sup>38</sup> The medic moved the wounded to a safer location over 500 yards

away, where they received treatment on site before a helicopter evacuated them.

That Army medic, SPC Monica Lin Brown, received the Silver Star in March 2008 for her actions; ironically, Army regulations prohibit her from serving in a front-line combat role. The reality of combat operations has forced the Army to ignore those regulations since both Afghanistan and Iraq present cultural challenges demanding the presence of female Soldiers. In both locations, they "are often tasked to work in all-male combat units—not only for their skills but also for the culturally sensitive role of providing medical treatment for local women, as well as searching them and otherwise interacting with them."<sup>39</sup> The restrictions remain despite the Army's recognition that Specialist Brown's "bravery, unselfish action and medical aid rendered under fire saved the lives of her comrades and represents the finest traditions of heroism in combat."<sup>40</sup> The 19-year-old Brown became the second woman since World War II to receive the Silver Star, the nation's third-highest medal for valor.

Brown's actions in combat directly contradicted the policies of her commander in chief, Pres. George W. Bush, who announced in a 2005 press conference that he would not authorize women to serve in ground combat units although he accepted the roles of women on combat surface ships and in aircraft.<sup>41</sup> Although President Bush forbade women from serving in the infantry, artillery, armor units, and all special operations forces, he did not order them out of combat-support units and duties, such as medics, since such a directive would hamper the military's performance in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, women carried on in their support duties and continued to excel in combat environments, with the exception of Specialist Brown. Within a week of the firefight that earned her the Silver Star, the Army chose to withdraw Brown from the field since, as she put it, "her presence as 'a female in a combat arms unit' had attracted attention."<sup>43</sup> This reaction by the Army appears dubious.

Discrepancies between policy and combat realities in regard to Specialist Brown's case were not the first incident to highlight the shortcomings of current policies on women in combat. Ironically, in the same year that President Bush issued his policy on women in combat, Sgt Leigh Ann Hester from the Kentucky National Guard came under fire during an ambush of her unit in Iraq, an event that eventually led to her nomination for a Silver Star. Thus, she became the first woman to receive this medal in the current conflict.

As a member of the 617th Military Police Company, Hester and her squad were escorting a supply convoy when Iraqi insurgents attacked. During the middle of the fight, she "led her team through the 'kill zone' and into a flanking position, where she assaulted a trench line with grenades and M203 grenade-launcher rounds."<sup>44</sup> Hester went on to clear two trenches of insurgents, killing three of them with her rifle. Rather than reveling in becoming the first woman since World War II to win the Silver Star, Sergeant Hester simply took pride in "the duties I performed that day as a soldier."<sup>45</sup> She attributed her response under fire to the training she received, claiming that she reacted as any Soldier should: "It's your life or theirs. . . . You've got a job to do—protecting yourself and your fellow comrades."<sup>46</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, the awarding of Hester's Silver Star "underscores the growing role in combat of U.S. female troops in Iraq's guerrilla war, where tens of thousands of American women have served, 36 have been killed and 285 wounded."<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the Army, whose female members must enter either the aviation arm or the military police for combat opportunities, the Air Force has allowed and even encouraged women to volunteer for combat positions.<sup>48</sup> After Secretary of Defense Les Aspin opened up combat aircraft to women in 1993, they slowly began to enter the male-dominated world of combat fighters and bombers. Despite Air Force encouragement and recruitment efforts to coax women into fighter and

bomber aircraft, the number of female combat pilots remains small. As of 2008, only 70 women fly fighter aircraft.<sup>49</sup> That number reflects about a 50 percent increase of the 47 who flew fighters in 2002.<sup>50</sup>

One female fighter pilot in this new generation, Maj Melissa "Shock" May, who flies the F-16, recently received the Distinguished Flying Cross for a combat mission over Baghdad. During that mission, May and her four-ship formation took out Soviet-made mobile surface-to-air missiles to allow the Army to continue its movement into the city by enabling US air superiority.<sup>51</sup> One wingman who took fire had to drop his external fuel tanks in order to evade an incoming Roland missile. May described the scenario in an interview with the *Air Force Times*: "There we were, in the weather and getting shot at. . . . And, after dropping his tanks, he [her wingman] was low on gas."<sup>52</sup>

In reality, women do serve in combat despite the best attempts of some pundits to restrict or completely deny them the opportunities to do so. The All Volunteer Force depends on the skills and professionalism of women, who make up nearly 15 percent of the force. Military leaders across the services recognize the crucial roles that women play in successful mission accomplishment. Even though they have proven themselves capable of handling the rigors of various combat roles, and even though senior military leaders acknowledge the necessity of female participation, there remains strong political opposition to the issue of women in combat.

## The Way Backward

Although the US military currently utilizes female Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to gather intelligence through conversations with local women and to assist in policing female suspects, these same Soldiers are explicitly restricted from assignment to combat positions.<sup>53</sup> In 2005, legislation introduced in the House of Representatives sought to increase restrictions on female

participation in the war on terror by prohibiting women from serving in forward support companies.<sup>54</sup> In a paper responding to the outcry over the proposed amendment, supporters stated that “there is no military or demographic reason, however, why America must expose young women, many of them mothers, to direct ground combat.”<sup>55</sup>

The Center for Military Readiness (CMR) goes even further in its objections to women in combat, proclaiming that the discussion involves not only the exposure of young mothers to the violence of combat but also the effectiveness of a gender-integrated fighting force. The CMR espouses that the realities of physical capabilities, unit discipline, ability to deploy, and unit cohesion trump calls for equal civic opportunities.<sup>56</sup> The center claims to support the right of women to serve but only in jobs that do not involve direct ground combat.

In his scathing criticism of women serving in the military (*Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military* [1989]) and his follow-up (*Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster* [1998]), Brian Mitchell pushes the debate beyond serving in combat to serving in the military altogether. He bases his conclusions on the fact that women do not adhere to the expectations of typical male combatants, using evidence from the service academies and recent sexual-assault scandals to drive home his point: “There are two kinds of cadets and midshipmen at today’s federal service academies. One is male: aggressive, strong, daring, and destined for combat; the other is female: none of the above.”<sup>57</sup>

At the heart of the debate over women in combat remain three basic propositions. First, female physical capabilities, including pregnancy issues, obviously differ from men’s and thus affect overall unit effectiveness. Second, critics argue that the presence of women hinders unit cohesion by limiting male bonding and creating disciplinary challenges due to the supposed sexually charged nature of coed units. Finally, many people assert that a civilized society based on Judeo-Christian morality should not

send its mothers and daughters into harm’s way.<sup>58</sup> This final argument also uses the issue of sex to suggest that captured female combatants will certainly become victims of rape or sexual brutality and therefore should avoid exposure to such risks.

For example, Mitchell’s second book on the subject, *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster*, highlights the Navy Tailhook scandal, the controversies over the Air Force’s Lt Kelly Flinn, and the sexual-assault scandal at Aberdeen Proving Ground.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell either ignores or has no knowledge of scientific studies of female physical standards and cases of successful combat-unit integrations in the Air Force that occurred between publication of his two books.<sup>60</sup>

Most notably absent from his follow-up analysis is the US Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine’s 1997 study of how female Soldiers responded to a physical fitness regimen designed to improve their performance of specified tasks associated with assigned duties, such as heavy lifting and long-distance marches with 75-pound backpacks.<sup>61</sup> Following the prescribed Army time constraints for physical fitness programs, the study revealed that appropriate training vastly improved female Soldiers’ performance. The training regimen—which replicated the actual work the women would do instead of emphasizing the typical push-ups, sit-ups, and long-distance-running programs—concluded that 78 percent of the participants could meet the Army’s minimum requirements for “very heavy” jobs, up from the prestudy level of 24 percent.<sup>62</sup>

The results of the study suggest that with proper training, women can perform physically demanding duties despite their perceived physical inferiority. Furthermore, the female stature offers benefits that exceed those of males. For example, the smaller bone structure of a female mechanic enables her to reach areas within an aircraft engine that an average man cannot access.<sup>63</sup>

This study also highlights an important aspect of military readiness, the gender issue aside. Traditionally, prescribed physical

standards for military jobs have had little to do with the actual work at hand.<sup>64</sup> A perfect example is the obstacle course present at most military installations. Most military jobs do not require a service member to jump up and over a wall, but a barrier of this type remains a common element of all the services' obstacle courses.

Less documented evidence exists for directly disproving the two other arguments readily cited by opponents of allowing women in combat and in the military. The contention concerning the effect of women on unit cohesion and discipline clearly falls under the responsibility of unit leadership, at either the squad or service level. Prior to the integration of women into the military, unit cohesion and the good order and discipline of a unit challenged its leadership.<sup>65</sup> To make a persuasive argument, opponents had to frame the debate in terms of negatives associated with integrating women into military units. Thus, the concentration on physical standards, unit cohesion, discipline, and mission effectiveness represented a shifting of the "debate from the grounds of belief to that of practical effects."<sup>66</sup> Critics of allowing women in combat and in the military essentially chose to ignore the ramifications and challenges associated with homogeneous groups in favor of trying to prove that the presence of women created more problems within military organizations.

Truly, for these critics the debate most often rests on the notion that the nation's political leaders cannot morally allow and condone organized violence against the female segment of the population. This argument also appears difficult to prove since it derives from subjective views of morality. On the one hand, it is acceptable to allow women to serve in traditional female roles in the military since those do not directly involve them in violence. In testimony to a 1992 presidential commission, Mitchell states that "women are desperately needed as military doctors and nurses, for the very reason that the military cannot get enough doctors and nurses,

male or female, as it is."<sup>67</sup> As long as women are protected from organized violence, social values remain intact. As Senator James Webb implied in a 1979 opinion piece and as the CMR currently suggests, allowing women to serve in the military condones and even encourages violence perpetrated against them.

Furthermore, none of the critics addresses the social acceptability and nobility of men engaging in organized violence against other men. Generally, each opponent of including women in combat and in the military implies that violence perpetuated by men against other men remains an acceptable societal norm. Their arguments consist of two simple explanations: (1) it is acceptable for men to engage in violence against other men but not for women to engage in or become victims of violence, and (2) society values its female members more highly since they deserve protection from violence.

Again, this aspect of their argument appears untenable. From a different perspective, it seems that American society places the safety of its female citizens above that of its male citizens, thus discriminating against the latter. Moreover, a closer examination of opponents' arguments reveals a lack of respect for half of the American population since they suggest that men serving in the military need to behave inappropriately in order to bond, develop their violent tendencies, and become effective combatants.

If Mitchell's argument holds and civilian leadership removes the 15 percent of women currently serving in the Army, would combat effectiveness diminish? In a RAND study of the assignment of Army women during recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, individuals in the field testified that "there simply were not enough personnel to do the job without women."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, which option would do more damage to the fabric of American society: full inclusion of women into the military based on physical capabilities, or revocation of laws that have allowed them to serve for

almost a generation? Finally, has the integration of women into combat roles truly impeded combat effectiveness? The final assessment remains unclear; thus far, however, women have proven formidable combatants, whether participating in official or unofficial capacities.

### ***Realities of the All Volunteer Force in Overseas Contingency Operations***

As the number of women in the military increases, commanders recognize that without their service in a variety of roles, units would struggle or even fail at their assigned missions. Since the Gulf War, military leadership has recognized that the "United States [can] no longer fight a major war or campaign without women."<sup>69</sup> Detractors counter that this reliance on women in critical roles directly results from services' decision to assign women to those roles.

Current hostilities confronting the United States present no clear delineation between front and rear lines. Rosemarie Skaine, an expert on gender issues in the military, suggests "that the old front line no longer exists because present day conflicts are peacekeeping tasks and that modern weaponry is more technologically operated than in the past."<sup>70</sup> Current Department of Defense, Army, and Marine Corps policies continue to restrict women from direct ground-combat roles, yet support positions such as those in the military police, supply, and intelligence have placed women into Iraq's and Afghanistan's "fluid lines of conflict" and "challeng[e] traditional ideas about what constitutes a 'combat' position."<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, the notion that exclusion policies protect women from the dangers of combat directly conflicts with the realities of insurgencies or irregular wars presently ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan. The disparity is most evident in the Army's use of women. Erin Solaro, a proponent of opening up combat roles to women, describes how, "in our current war, for example, female soldiers drive fuel tankers all over Iraq. They are not, however, allowed to

crew tanks. A fuel tanker is not a glamorous target, but it is a lucrative one, particularly if it is resupplying tanks or Bradley fighting vehicles."<sup>72</sup> Although the Air Force continues to lead the services in terms of integration, specific career fields such as special operations remain closed to women. Women can fly close air support missions to assist special operations forces on the ground and risk being shot down and captured by the enemy; however, they cannot serve in those ground units.

Over the three decades since the integration of women into the armed forces, organizational decisions, cultural shifts and evolutions, and the performance of women have contributed to a convoluted organizational schema or thought process that now pervades the US military: Policies exclude women from combat, yet they have performed well in combat; since operational needs sometimes dictate the use of women in these traditional combat roles, the armed forces will merely temporarily attach them to those restricted roles.

Solaro explains how this organizational schema, instituted in the early years of the All Volunteer Force and in effect today, demonstrates "the lineal ancestor of the present pretense that women in Iraq and Afghanistan are not *assigned* to combat units, only *attached*" (emphasis in original).<sup>73</sup> The armed services have always accepted the possibility that women may become involved in combat yet have willingly chosen to deny them opportunities to serve in official, direct ground-combat positions. In reality, however, women do perform duties in direct ground combat. Paul Wolfowitz, former deputy secretary of defense, clearly recognizes the truth about the environment in which the integrated US military operates: "As we consider the issue of woman-power in the service today it's not just a matter of women being entitled to serve this country. It is a simple fact that we could not operate our military services without women. And as skill levels essential to our missions continue to increase, it will be even more essential that we draw

from all our citizens, that we draw from the largest pool of talent available.”<sup>74</sup>

### **The Solution: Selection Based on Capabilities, Not Gender**

Along with the apparent evolution of American society’s perception of women serving in combat, one sees evidence of a cultural shift. In the two current wars, women have died in the line of duty and in combat operations with no outcry from the American public. Contrary to the opinion that the spectacle of bringing women home in body bags would trigger enormous public outcry, there is “little evidence that the [American] public is somehow less willing to tolerate their suffering than that of men.”<sup>75</sup> The only public outcries have come primarily from antiwar critics who use the death of any service member to draw attention to their political position.

Fears that placing women in combat positions would precipitate declines in the military’s combat effectiveness have not been realized. The fact remains that influences other than women’s involvement—such as technological advances in communications—have created greater changes in the military.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, dependence on the All Volunteer Force has also induced the military to adapt to the realities of women making up an increasing percentage of the services. Since “the country’s ability to maintain an all-volunteer army has been considered to depend on the effective use of the female labor force,” military leaders who deride a return to the conscripted force have had to find a way to exploit the capabilities of women.<sup>77</sup>

Not all attempts have been successful, as Solaro suggests. However, just as the integration of black Soldiers took time to overcome organizational biases and obstacles, so is the integration of women into combat roles slowly moving forward. Senior Army leaders acknowledge the contributions of female Soldiers in the counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many Army leaders, including Gen Gordon Sullivan, former

chief of staff, challenged a proposed congressional amendment in 2005 that would have further restricted women’s combat roles simply because such a reversal would hamstring Army operations around the world by closing 21,925 slots currently open to female Soldiers.<sup>78</sup>

For the American military, much of the emphasis has shifted away from the inabilities of its members to the capabilities they bring to the fight. In the case of female Soldiers on patrol in Iraq, their gender has allowed the military to engage and interact with half of the Iraqi population without violating cultural taboos and restrictions, thus facilitating greater human intelligence, threat assessment, and access to the people often responsible for rearing the next generation of Iraqi citizens. If followed to the letter, current policies would deny the military these opportunities.

Critics suggest that Gen Norman Schwarzkopf condemned women to minor support roles in the military when he declared, “Decisions on what roles women should play in war must be based on military standards, not women’s rights.”<sup>79</sup> Schwarzkopf’s assessment actually supports the idea that *capability, not gender* should enable or preclude an American from serving in combat. Furthermore, “the situation and ‘the rules’ have changed but our modern military has not adapted itself to this new world”; refusal by opponents to acknowledge the realities of the performance of women in combat roles only hinders the debate.<sup>80</sup> To ensure appropriate policies on combat forces, the military must practice honest and objective assessment.

Once capabilities rather than gender drive assignment decisions, all other issues associated with integrating women would become typical leadership challenges. Should members of an integrated unit, for example, engage in inappropriate relationships, unit leadership must address these situations and mete out appropriate punishment for violations under the *Uniform Code of Military Justice*.

## Conclusion

*The real catch was to have a female medic out there because of the cultural sensitivities and the flexibility that gave commanders. It is absolutely not about gender in terms of how they [women] will do.*

—Maj Paul Narowski  
73rd Cavalry Regiment

Overseas contingency operations have rekindled debate over the assignment of American women to combat positions, revealing that the regulations governing the role of women in combat are “vague, ill defined, and based on an outmoded concept of wars with clear front lines that rarely exist in today’s counterinsurgencies.”<sup>81</sup> Despite the realities of the current conflicts, the debate over the role of women in combat will never cease as long as political leaders continue to relegate women to inferior roles in American society.

By acknowledging the vital role women play in armed conflicts, the political leadership of the United States can shape American culture to recognize that women can and do engage in violence for and against the state. When Americans can culturally accept this fact, troops fighting the current wars will be better prepared to face female insurgents in the future. Ultimately, such insurgents share similar motivations and strive for the same universal objectives as military women and their predecessors in the resistance: they fight to give their children a safe future.

Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, explains that modern female resistance fighters and suicide bombers are “fully aware of being free women with an important message to pass on and who could be examples to all women the world over.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, tactics employed by terrorist organizations and insurgencies, including the use of female combatants, have rendered combat-exclusion policies pointless. A recent RAND study of the Army’s assignment of women to combat

roles found current policy “not actionable” since it was “crafted for a linear battlefield” that depended on notions of “forward and well forward [that] were generally acknowledged to be almost meaningless in the [current] Iraqi theater.”<sup>83</sup> If America’s current enemies, undoubtedly more conservative about the role of women in their societies, acknowledge the efficacy of female combatants in their operations, political leaders must recognize what military leaders have accepted as fact. Women can contribute successfully to combat operations and remain ready to do so.

American female warriors face strong criticism from pundits who desire a return to an all-male combat force. Like their sisters who fought for the Soviet Union, American women serve a nation that propagates notions of equality yet continues to discriminate, based on gender. When President Bush “forcefully backed the Army’s [combat exclusion] restrictions” and proclaimed a policy of “no women in combat,” he reinforced the notion that American women are not the equals of American men.<sup>84</sup> Such proclamations further inhibit the abilities of women to integrate fully and reinforce perceptions that they are incapable of effectively serving in combat roles.

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan directly contradict the arguments put forth by critics of using women in combat. Females have proven that they are formidable fighters who can engage in direct ground combat. Combat units such as Private Brown’s have accepted women as equal members, Brown’s unit considering her “one of the guys, mixing it up, clearing rooms, doing everything that anybody else was doing,” and wanting to keep her as its medic.<sup>85</sup> Recently, George Casey, the Army chief of staff, testified to lawmakers that combat-exclusion policies needed review “in light of how women have served in the two wars.”<sup>86</sup> This announcement came after the Navy rescinded its policy banning women from serving on submarines. Apparently, a move to lift all bans and use capabilities-based standards to determine fitness for duty in

any position enjoys strong support, although conservative opposition continues to paint a picture of mothers going off to war. However, John Nagl, retired Army lieutenant colonel and president of the Center for New American Security, assessed that in light of the 220,000 women who have fought in both wars and the 120 who have paid the ultimate price, we should "simply recogniz[e] a truth that's already been written in blood and sweat on the battlefield."<sup>87</sup>

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have forced the United States to reevaluate a number of foreign and domestic policies as well as the organizational structures of

American armed forces. These wars have also highlighted the need for policy makers to reconsider combat-exclusion rules that currently govern US combat operations. Women have always been subjected to the violence of war. It is now time for the United States to encourage and empower American women to serve in combat roles if they meet physical requirements determined by the specific role—not some arbitrary physical standard. Policy leaders should rescind current combat-exclusion policies and welcome American women as civic equals. ☀

## Notes

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